

“Last Rites” & The Anointing of the Sick - Explained

by Father Jason C. Hage

When considering the Sacrament of Anointing, one must always situate this sacrament within the Church’s larger mission of healing given to her by Christ. The healing of the sick and the infirm in the name of Jesus Christ is one of the surest signs that God’s Kingdom is breaking into our world. *“Christ’s compassion toward the sick and his healing of almost every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that ‘God has visited his people.’”* When physical and spiritual healing occurs, we see the fulfillment of God’s promise that he would be with us “to the end of the age.” The most compelling evidence in the Bible of the use of the Sacrament of Anointing in the early Church is that of James 5:14-15: *“Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”* This single passage lays out the essential elements of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, and it should be noted that it comes directly from Scripture.

One important aspect of catechesis concerning the Sacrament of Anointing is the fact that after the Second Vatican Council the Sacrament was no longer understood as an action belonging to the “Last Rites”, as that ritual which a dying person receives in order to assist that person in his or her death. Rather, the Sacrament was restored to its original understanding as the sacramental source of healing power. *The Anointing of the Sick “is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.”* The Ritual of Anointing goes so far as to say that the delaying of the Sacrament by those who are in need of healing are actually misusing the Sacrament: *“The faithful should be encouraged to ask for the anointing, and, as soon as the time for the anointing comes, to receive it with faith and devotion, not misusing the sacrament by putting it off.”*

With the above in mind, it should be noted that the “Last Rites” is now replaced by the *Continuous Rite of Penance, Anointing, and Viaticum*: “For those who are about to depart from this life, the Church offers the person Penance, Anointing of the Sick, and the Eucharist as *Viaticum* (food for the journey) given at the end of life. These are ‘the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland.’” It is precisely in this continuous rite, and especially in *Viaticum*, in which a dying person receives their last Holy Communion, that they are immediately prepared for passage from this life to the next. *Although the Sacrament of Anointing is celebrated as part of this continuous rite, it should not be solely relegated to celebration immediately prior to death.* Rather, as said before, it should be primarily understood to be a sacrament of healing for the ill and infirm as well as the elderly.

In regard to catechesis on the Sacrament of Anointing, it is important to know the effects of the Sacrament. One will quickly notice that the celebration of the Sacrament does not always result in the physical healing of the recipient of the Sacrament. The Church teaches that the primary effect of the Sacrament is the spiritual healing of the recipient: *“Even if there is no physical healing, the primary effect of the Sacrament is a spiritual healing by which the sick person receives the Holy Spirit’s gift of peace and courage to deal with the difficulties that accompany serious illness and old age.”* For someone who is undergoing serious physical illness, sometimes the greatest gift they can receive in the midst of their illness is spiritual healing. Spiritual healing often results in quicker and more immediate physical healing due to the person’s openness to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love when facing their illness.

The openness to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in the face of serious illness can be a powerful witness to the Gospel in our world. Instead of succumbing to discouragement and despair, the recipient of the Sacrament is filled with hope in the knowledge that their sufferings are united to the sufferings of Christ in an even more intimate way: *“Another effect of this Sacrament is union with the Passion of Christ. By uniting ourselves more closely with the sufferings of Our Lord, we receive the grace of sharing in the saving work of Christ.”* When the recipient’s illness is united to the sufferings of Christ through the Sacrament, the recipient’s sufferings can truly become redemptive both for the Church and for the world.

Another effect of the Sacrament of Anointing is the forgiveness of sins: *“A sick person’s sins are forgiven if he or she was not able to go to Confession prior to the celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.”* Just as we see in Mark 2:1-12, Jesus’ healing ministry was always connected to the spiritual healing of the individual, and this spiritual healing was often defined by the forgiveness of the individual’s sins. When the Sacrament of Anointing is celebrated today, we should see Jesus’ ministry of healing made present in the ministry of the bishop or priest who celebrates the Sacrament: *“In the Church’s Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, through the ministry of the priest, it is Jesus who touches the sick to heal them from sin—and sometimes physical ailment.”* Jesus is truly alive and active in the life of the individual and the community when the Sacrament of Anointing is celebrated.

In conclusion, one important principle to take away from this article is that one should never withhold the Sacrament of Anointing from someone who is currently ill or infirm, from one who will be undergoing a major surgical procedure, *and, most especially, from one who one has begun hospice care.* A priest should be called for this sacrament long before someone is immediately dying. For to hold off on the Sacrament of Anointing until one has arrived at death’s door is a misuse of the Sacrament itself.